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*Publication date:*  
2012

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Hobson, C. E., Kurki, M., & Bridoux, J. (2012, Sept 14). Rethinking Democracy Support. United Nations University Press. <http://hdl.handle.net/2160/7877>

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# Rethinking Democracy Support

Jeff Bridoux, Christopher Hobson and Milja Kurki

Policy Paper  
September 2012

## Overview

Democracy promoters face new demands in the context of rapidly evolving world dynamics. Democracy support is under pressure in the wake of the financial crisis, the ongoing Arab Spring and other important global developments. For many recipients of democracy assistance, 'liberal democracy' as the blueprint for governance reform is now becoming a subject of debate. Difficult operational and conceptual challenges need to be tackled in democracy promotion today. This policy paper, which draws on extensive discussions with democracy practitioners, examines the dilemmas faced by liberal democracy promotion from the perspective of a European Research Council-funded project based at Aberystwyth University, entitled 'Political Economies of Democratisation'. It suggests an innovative way forward that focuses on embracing the different ways democracy is understood and practised.



**L**IBERAL DEMOCRACY, AND ITS PROMOTION, are now facing a set of serious challenges.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, as the Arab Spring demonstrates, democratic aspirations are intensifying, which opens up significant new opportunities for democracy support. On the other hand, in the context of the financial crisis and austerity, levels of funding for democracy aid are being reconsidered, and the credibility and effectiveness of democracy promoters' work is under renewed scrutiny. Furthermore, a qualitatively new type of challenge has emerged: as a result of the repeated politico-economic crises and changing power balances in the world order, aspects of the 'liberal democratic' model traditionally at the heart of democracy promotion are being questioned. This discussion reflects the growth of needs and aspirations that are not readily met by a classical liberal focus on elections and political rights. Calls for dignity, economic justice, local ownership and global democracy require innovative responses from those engaged in democracy support, responses that take account of the emerging discussion over the different meanings and forms democracy can take. The recent questioning of democracy's meaning has the potential to be an important catalyst in expanding the way democracy is practised at home and supported abroad.

This paper argues for an innovative response to current challenges, one which foregrounds a consideration of values and conceptual challenges. It draws upon research conducted by a European Research Council-funded research project based at Aberystwyth University, entitled 'Political Economies of Democratisation'.<sup>2</sup> It has also been informed by discussions with democracy promotion practitioners and policymakers during spring 2012. The paper identifies four issues that need to be addressed by those involved in democracy support today: (1) a crisis of confidence and influence, (2) problems in identifying democratic actors, (3) concerns over efficient delivery mechanisms, and (4) how to deal with new players in democracy promotion. The paper then suggests four possible responses to these challenges: (1) embracing values, (2) acknowledging that democracy has multiple meanings, (3) understanding democracy as a political *and* economic regime, and (4) reinforcing the demand for democracy. This approach seeks to provide the grounding for more responsive, flexible and effective policy reforms in democracy support.

## Challenges

Discussions with practitioners and policy-makers have identified four key concrete challenges faced in democracy assistance today.

### 1. A crisis of confidence and influence

The late 1980s and early 1990s arguably constituted a 'golden age' for Western democracy promotion. It was an age of liberal internationalism, of increased democratic demands, of liberal triumphalism and confident advancement of liberal ideals in developing and undemocratic countries. Today the confidence of donors in liberal internationalism and liberal ideals, and the demand for them globally, is far less evident. Indeed, in important respects the global financial crisis and the Arab Spring have exposed crucial weaknesses in the assumptions that underpin the liberal democracy promotion paradigm.

The strategy of advocating governance reforms guided by a mostly unquestioned adherence to the value-system of 'liberal democracy'—with individual political rights, elections and economic freedom at its heart—is under greater scrutiny. While elections and political rights remain important for many activists, confidence in the classical version of liberal democracy has weakened. An increasing number of people around the world are disgruntled with an understanding of democracy limited to elections and the protection of political and civil rights, which simultaneously seeks to safeguard economic liberty and open-markets above all else. Also, the party politics characteristic of the US and of EU countries appears increasingly stale and less attractive. Indeed, many activists now argue for democratic innovations

that push classical liberal ideals to their limits. And calls for economic democracy, social democracy and global democracy motivate many activists seeking a further extension of democratic ideals. They see as problematic the classical liberal ideals that are premised on a separation of the political and economic spheres, and thereby work to safeguard economic freedoms as external to 'democracy'. A recasting of liberal democratic ideals and practices is increasingly called for.

Recipients of governance reform aid can see that liberal democracy is struggling, both politically and economically, in the West. It has also become increasingly evident that democracy aid has failed to encourage the widespread consolidation of liberal democracies throughout the world, as was previously hoped for. Instead transitions have led to many different destinations: partial democracies, hybrid regimes and states that have undergone economic liberalization with limited change in the political sphere. In this context, there is now a less receptive audience and context for the kind of relatively unreflective liberal democratic programme that democracy promoters have been accustomed to advancing. Problems of authority and credibility trouble the deliverers of democracy aid: they are having a hard time convincing recipients of the virtues of Western democracy and its related economic structures. Despite the increasingly evident shortcomings of liberal democracy and rising anti-democratic tendencies in the West, there is actually increasing interest in democracy assistance. There is, however, much less willingness to simply 'listen to and learn' from donors on democratization, on economic policies, or on how democratic aspirations should be 'effectively' guided towards particular types of democratic outcomes.

## 2. Actors

Many donors are also finding it difficult to connect with the broader range of democratic aspirations that they are seeking to help enable. Indeed, many policymakers, practitioners and recipients remark that there is an increasing disconnect between what democracy promoters offer and what is called for by recipients. Many programmes, projects and instruments exist, but the management criteria and working practices of democracy aid can be restrictive, complicated, unresponsive and lacking in feedback mechanisms. They do little to encourage genuine discussion, exploration and reflection on what democracy can mean for different actors, and what democratization in various settings might entail.

Democracy support functions best when conceived and delivered in balanced ways. For example, both civil society and institutional work are essential elements in enabling democracy to survive and thrive—a lesson already being incorporated, with most donors engaging in institution building and civil society support. Another important balance to strike is more difficult, however: how to include all kinds of political actors, and their differing ideals, in democracy support frameworks. Democracy is a political, value-driven and—whether donors like it or not—ideological project: no democracy, democratic actor or democracy promoter is 'neutral'. As such, liberal democracy support practices benefit some actors more than others and can prevent democracy promoters from recognizing democratic actors that do not match their understanding of what democrats look like. For example, in many circumstances

peasant movements and trade unions calling for non-liberal democratic forms of economic democracy or social democracy may be simply ignored or missed. In this way, assistance programmes can harbour selection biases: a tendency to fund or support ‘Western-friendly’ and ‘liberal’ actors, conceptions of democracy familiar ‘to us’.

There needs to be considerably more reflection on how democracy assistance can best incorporate and encourage a wider diversity of ideas about democracy. It should not only consist of funding liberal, progressive, Western-friendly and professional organizations. To be ‘pluralist’ and ‘context-sensitive’ democracy promoters need to engage with groups that may be non-European, non-American, non-capitalist or even non-classically liberal democratic in their views, a wider range of volunteer-based organizations, as well as actors with diverse religious beliefs. Just because a state or civil society actor does not conform to the standard image of liberal democracy does not mean they are ‘non-democratic’. Participatory democratic aspirations in Bolivia tell us this, as does the persistence of ‘social democratic’ or ‘radical democratic’ civil society organizations elsewhere. Those engaged in democracy support need to think about how to balance their own understandings of democracy with the needs of the wide range of democratic activists on the ground globally. At the same time, it is clear that the pretence that democracy promotion is apolitical, non-ideological and neutral is unrealistic and does not convince recipients. There has to be greater consideration about what core values democracy promoters are advancing, and how these can incorporate a much greater range of perspectives.

### 3. Delivery mechanisms

There are also problems in the way democracy assistance is delivered. In an age of austerity, development aid budgets are not necessarily drastically reduced, but they are subjected to a new rationale: maximization of return on aid investment through greater measurement of ‘impact’ of aid programmes. This is exemplified by donors’ insistence on getting recipients of democracy assistance to demonstrate ‘impact’ and ‘performance’. In this approach, democracy must be measurable and assessable, but rarely is it debatable. This has translated into various reforms to procurement and assessment methods used by democracy promoters. Two principles organize this push for better operational efficiency: open competition between non-governmental organizations, and quantification of democracy in order to assess its ‘progress’.

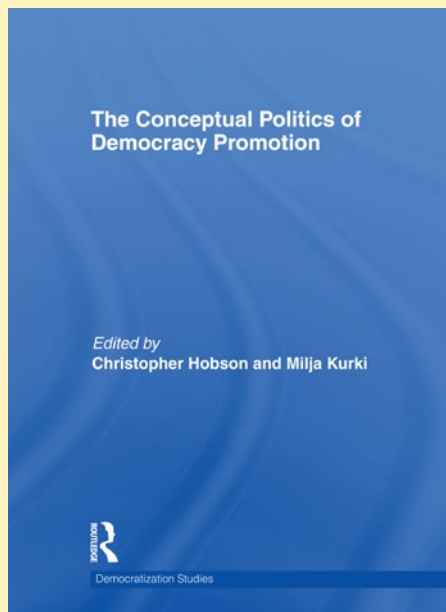
There are obviously good reasons for adopting these principles, but they also conflict with some of the core aims of democracy support. Premised on economic rationalization, this approach effectively comes at the expense of political deliberation on how democracy should be understood and practised. Excessive concern with aid efficiency may result in inflexible and unresponsive programmes that do little to encourage debate and dialogue about what democracy can and should mean. Indeed, civil society partners of democracy promoters are often turned into economically rational actors (or ‘corporations’) that offer their allegiance to market logic as they compete for funding and grants, rather than focusing fully on engaging with society, and specifically democracy.<sup>3</sup> This actually works to undermine the basic aims of democracy assistance, namely, to foster the growth of democratic actors, values and practices.

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Christopher Hobson  
and Milja Kurki (eds),  
*The Conceptual Politics  
of Democracy Promotion*  
(London: Routledge, 2011)

How do different meanings of the concept of 'democracy' operate in democracy promotion? How do conceptual decisions influence real political events? How is policy and reflection on democracy promotion shaped by the way different practitioners and scholars understand democracy? The *Conceptual Politics of Democracy Promotion* explores the way in which the meaning, content and context of 'democracy' are interpreted by different actors in democracy promotion, and how these influence political decisions. Introducing a theoretically new approach to the study of democracy promotion, the volume shows how the alternate ways that democracy can be understood reflects specific interpretations of political and normative ideals, as well as being closely tied to social power relations, interests, and struggles between political actors. With original contributions from some of the most prominent specialists on democracy promotion and democratization, the book examines a number of concrete cases of democracy promotion and contestation over democracy's meaning.

.....  
"It [the book] is the most serious effort yet coming from the scholarly research community to raise hard questions about the conceptual bases of international democracy support, about models and methods, principles and practices, entry points and end points. ... The result is a volume that could play a valuable role in the larger effort to reconsider and renovate international democracy support."

**Thomas Carothers**, Vice President for Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415596879/>

## 4. New players

In a context of multiple political and economic crises, some forms of governance fare better than others. The relative success of Chinese 'state capitalism' and Russian 'sovereign democracy' have increased concerns over the spread of an 'autocratic' development model. Even if the traditional Western liberal democratic model seems to be struggling as problems continue with the Eurozone and the fragile state of the US economy, new emerging democracies offer alternatives to the existing political and economic architecture of democracy promotion. Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa and Turkey have all undergone successful processes of democratization that could serve as useful examples for others. A recent study argues that emerging democracies might be able to do more to incorporate their experiences into democracy support.<sup>4</sup>

The achievements of emerging democratic powers show that there are alternatives to the standardized liberal democratic model of political and economic liberalization. Engagement with more established actors is not easy, however. There seems to be reluctance on behalf of the emerging powers to participate in democracy support work with the same intensity as their Western counterparts. Indeed, fearful of imperial agendas, the new democracies emphasize the importance of respecting the national sovereignty of all states and demonstrate a preference for multilateralism—especially in a South-South configuration.<sup>5</sup>

How should democracy promoters of a more traditional nature co-operate with these new actors, which work with ideologically somewhat more pluralist perspectives or equivocal attitudes? How should multinational, multilateral alliances for democracy assistance



be constructed today, and on what principles? In asking these questions, it is important to remember that not only traditional power hierarchies but also Western conceptual assumptions about democracy’s meaning may need to ‘give’. There is a need to adjust to the appearance of rising powers and new democratic actors, and in doing so, existing democracy promoters need to reconsider the assumptions that shape how they understand and support democracy. This necessitates developing more open and flexible approaches to democracy promotion that are capable of incorporating these different perspectives and experiences.

## A Different Kind of Democratizing Response

What should be done to address the four challenges that this paper has identified? We provide here four proposals for policymakers, practitioners and recipients engaged in democracy support.

### 1. Embrace values

Although many democracy promoters have shifted towards apolitical, neutral and technical instruments and funding structures, in the context of returning debate over democracy’s meaning this may be a mistake. This project’s research suggests that today donors may be better off embracing and celebrating the value-driven, and indeed ‘ideological’, nature of their work. Democracy is an inevitably contested concept, and pretending otherwise is not helpful for democracy promoters. False neutrality can create scepticism and resentment amongst recipients, and also blind donors

to unintended biases in their work. Indeed, democracy promoters would benefit from openly reflecting on the values that shape their work, rather than simply stating them or assuming their superiority. This would also encourage dialogue about democracy’s different meanings in democratizing countries, between donors and recipients.

Problems of authority and credibility may be constructively addressed by democracy promoters openly making the case for democracy and what it should mean today. This is the best way to confront Chinese and Russian models: through argument. Engaging in debate, rather than providing technical answers to governance reform, is also a more humble approach that shows an awareness of the problems and limitations of liberal democracy. Through a more value-aware approach donors can open their eyes to the many possible biases in how democracy is funded, and recognize better when some democratic aspirants fall outside their ‘gaze’. It can also facilitate more flexible and political, and less ‘scientific’, democracy promotion instruments and assessments methods. There are already strong calls from political foundations, NGOs and recipient organizations for such methods. While accountability is important, and reporting structures surely should continue to exist, the mode of management and reporting should be modified to fit the nature of the policy agenda. Democracy promotion is not a science but an art: it is reliant on subjective assessments, interpretations and dynamic processes not readily quantifiable. Management and funding processes should recognize that the most valuable forms of democracy support might not be simply demonstrated through indicators or charts. It is not easy to

quantify dialogue and engagement with recipients, but this can be very significant and worthwhile. Value-reflection may also help in building constructive relationships with new actors in democracy promotion: for example, multilateral co-operation is likely to be more attractive when there is genuine room for discussion about what democratic values should be supported.

## 2. Democracy has multiple meanings

Democracy is a famously contested concept. Liberal democracy is certainly not monolithic: there are a range of different versions from classical liberal democracy, to reform liberalism, to neoliberal democracy. There are also many extra-liberal models of democracy that can be supported, such as social democracy, participatory democracy, radical democracy and global democracy. Democracy promoters need to appreciate this wide variety of meanings and actively engage with them in order to better address the multiplicity of actors and their demands in recipient countries. This may mean advocating a wider range of liberal democratic ideals. For example, the Obama administration has—if somewhat unsystematically—advocated a reform liberal approach, in contrast to the neoliberal model that was emphasized during the Bush presidency. It may also mean exploring extra-liberal models, however, which the EU has done in supporting seemingly social democratic ideals alongside classical liberal notions. Such cases suggest that more explicit consideration of different democratic ideals is necessary, as previous efforts to move towards a different kind of democracy promotion have been at best instrumental and relatively unreflective.



Milja Kurki, *Democratic Futures: Re-visioning Democracy Promotion and Democratization* (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2012)

Democracy promotion has been an influential policy agenda in many Western states, international organisations, and amongst many NGO actors. But what kinds of models of democracy do democracy promoters promote? This book examines in detail the conceptual orders that underpin democracy support activity, and specifically the conceptions of democracy that democracy promoters, consciously or inadvertently, work with. In the context of the financial crisis, contestation over democracy's meaning and its ideal politico-economic forms is returning, but how is this contestation reflected, if at all, in democracy promotion policies and practices?

This book argues that while some efforts have been taken by democracy promoters to take account of the diverse and contested meanings attached to the idea 'democracy' amongst political actors, debate over multiple potential models of democracy, and economic governance, remains stunted today. This is due to various conceptual and discursive orders which constrain the ability of democracy promoters to conceive of, and to promote, multiple visions of possible democratic futures. Seeking to open up debate on multiple models of democracy, and on more democratic democracy promotion practice, this study provides the reader not only with the outlines of various possible politico-economic models of democracy, but also with a close empirical engagement with democracy promoters discourses and practices. It also advances a set of concrete policy provocations which may enable a more, pluralist and flexible democracy promotion practice to emerge.

<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415690348/>

To recognize that multiple understandings of democracy exist and are relevant would enable a more effective form of democracy support. It would allow democracy promoters to more deeply engage in two-way dialogue with recipients and to talk with a wider pool of actors in recipient countries. It might also enable democracy promoters to identify bottlenecks and impediments to fruitful engagement with actors through donors' delivery mechanisms. Appreciating that there might be different understandings of democracy at play might suggest different kinds of practical strategies. Overall, democracy support would benefit from a move in the direction of less 'measurement' and 'competition' and more explicit discussion on democratic expectations. Through such debate democracy promoters may be able to seize a greater range and number of opportunities to support democratic aspirations. Sustained dialogue about what democracy can and should mean would likely also ensure more positive responses from recipients and non-traditional actors, which may hold democratic ideas that fall outside the classical liberal approach.

### 3. Democracy is a political and economic regime

Democracy promoters have tended to think of the idea of democracy in strictly 'political' terms: as a system of political and civil rights that defines the relationships between political actors and citizens. This is a specifically liberal democratic view, however. It creates the illusion that the political and economic realms are separate and that democracy is merely 'political'. All versions of democracy—liberal or otherwise—incorporate

*“There is a need to reflect on democracy’s multiple meanings, and through this process identify the often unrecognized democratic demands in target countries...”*

assumptions about the relationship between democracy and economy, state and markets. In this sense, all variants of democracy—liberal or otherwise—are ‘politico-economic models of democracy’.

Recognizing this fundamental link between politics and economics in democracy is crucial in order to understand: (1) the role of many important economic actors, such as international financial organizations, in structuring democracy and democracy support; (2) the different views of democracy’s meaning held by different actors; (3) why the financial crisis affects debates on democracy so deeply; and (4) why the development–democracy nexus needs to be not only acknowledged but revised as a central part of democracy support.

Many democracy promoters already acknowledge the role of politico-economic ‘variables’ in democracy support. There is now a need to expand this awareness and dig deeper into the different possible politico-economic models of democracy that can be promoted; how these impact on relationships between state, market and other actors; and the types of development and democracy support that are engaged in. Doing so would assist in advancing a form of democracy support that would have more purchase, more pluralism, more sensitivity and more dialogical engagements between donors and recipients.

## 4. Reinforce demand over supply of democracy

Democracy promotion discourse is now much more sensitive to the way local context shapes what is possible. There is greater awareness of the

need for local ownership and deeper acknowledgement that democratization is not a one-size-fits-all process, but varies according to the societal context. These statements have to be not only made, but practised far more fully than they have been to date. Indeed, a fundamental weakness of an unreflective liberal democratic approach to political transition is a failure to engage with *all* civil society actors, including the most unlikely partners.

The issue today is not only encouraging ‘demand,’ but ‘seeing’ the demand in a new way. There is a need to reflect on democracy’s multiple meanings, and through this process identify the often unrecognized democratic demands in target countries—made by the homeless, by trade unionists, by religious groups, by peasant organizations and many other actors. It is not just political parties, NGOs and other professional civil society movements that should be engaged with. Better entry points may be developed when democratic aspirations are not so readily funnelled into specific classical liberal democratic expressions, but are considered as democratic and supported even when non-institutionalized, informal, voluntary, non-professionalized, non-liberal or critical of Western policies. Democracy promoters need to directly tackle their selection biases through reflecting on their own assumptions: it is not only people ‘like us’ that are democrats and it is not just ‘democrats like us’ that have legitimate democratic aspirations. Democracy support has to take seriously the wide range of ways democracy can be understood and practised.

## Conclusion

The challenges now facing democracy promoters require qualitatively different types of responses. It is suggested here that one valuable approach is to

reflect on the way understandings about democracy shape democracy promotion practice. This is because even the most ‘neutral’ and ‘technical’ democracy support programmes implicitly carry specific political and economic ideals, value-assumptions, ideological notions and selection biases. Paying attention to the value-laden nature of democracy promotion and reflecting on democracy’s multiple meanings is both possible and necessary. Doing so should be the concern primarily of the donors, not just the recipients. What kind of democracy is on offer, what is demanded and why? How can different kinds of democracy be supported? A strategy that begins from self-reflection on values and prioritizes dialogue will not only be ethically desirable in ‘democratizing’ democracy promotion—in making sure democratic debate on multiple potential democratic futures is ensured—but also in practically rendering democracy support more credible and responsive, and potentially also more effective.

### End notes

<sup>1</sup> The authors wish to extend special thanks to Peter Burnell who discussed in detail the structure and core aims of the paper with the authors prior to paper’s formulation. We would also like to thank warmly Thomas Carothers and Nick Bouchet for their input and comments on an earlier draft version.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/interpol/research/research-projects/political-economies-democratisation/>

<sup>3</sup> Arendt, H. (1958) *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press) and Dryzek, J. S (1996) *Democracy in Capitalist Times. Ideals, Limits, and Struggles* (New York: Oxford University Press).

<sup>4</sup> See Carothers, T. and Youngs, R. (2011) “Looking for Help. Will Rising Democracies Become International Democracy Supporters?”, *The Carnegie Papers* (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for Democracy, July 2011).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.



‘Democracy is a messy form of governance so should democracy promotion be neat and tidy? The authors of this report warn against reliance on tidiness and argue that, as “democracy promotion is not a science but an art”, promoters should embrace this inherent messiness and be prepared to have it reflected in their actions; be ready to articulate the values behind their actions; and be open to unpack their foundational assumptions. A bracing cold shower can be quite invigorating from time to time and this timely and thoughtful report aims to have that effect.

Democracy promotion practitioners are thus being challenged to rethink their oeuvre and work out what could be done differently ... and better. The challenge for the practitioner is to accomplish this task within the countervailing strictures imposed by scarcity, accountability and transparency. The political economy of democracy promotion will test the limits of what may be open to practitioners. But the forces calling for quality democracy and democracy “that delivers” provide ballast for those prepared to take up the invitation of the authors to renew the way they think and act.’

*Roland Rich, Executive Head of United Nations Democracy Fund*

## Political Economies of Democratisation

The Political Economies of Democratisation project studies the conceptual foundations of democracy support. It examines specifically policy-makers’ and policy practitioners’ understandings of the meaning of the concept democracy and its politico-economic conditions. Democracy is famously one of the most intensely contested concepts in social and political life and it is this contestation over democracy’s meaning and its implications for democracy promotion that this project seeks to examine. The project’s findings indicate that while broadening out of the meaning of democracy has taken place in democracy promotion, with more possibilities opened up for more pluralistic and diverse activities and co-operative relationships, the practice of democracy promotion is still guided in essence by a more or less ‘liberal democratic’ set of assumptions about democracy’s meaning. This has many consequences for the credibility as well as viability of democracy promotion in the current changing and contested world order.

<http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/interpol/research/research-projects/political-economies-democratisation/>



The research leading to these results has been funded by the European Research Council under the European Community’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) ERC Grant Agreement 202 596. All views remain those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Community or its representatives, or Aberystwyth University, or the United Nations University.

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United Nations University Press  
The United Nations University  
53-70, Jingumae 5-chome  
Shibuya-ku, Tokyo 150-8925  
Japan